

The Commons

UNSPOKEN CONNECTIONS

How I Learned to Love Punctuation



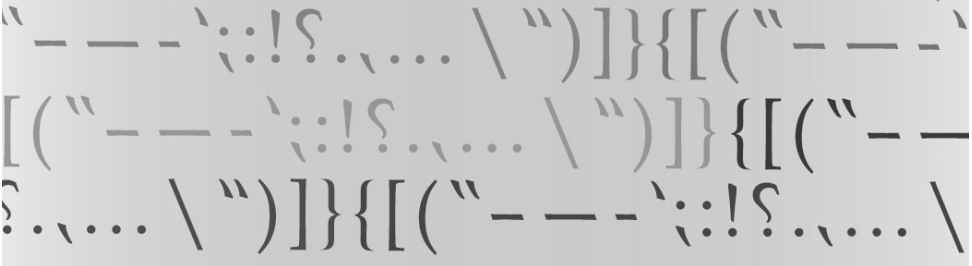
Amy Nawrocki

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How I Learned to Love Punctuation

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I fell in love with my first punctuation mark in the 10th grade, and like most first loves it was a complete tumble. My attraction coincided with an initiation into poetry and my discovery of e.e. cummings. Interestingly, it wasn't the marks themselves, but their mention, and like most love affairs, there's no accounting for the how or why of it. It was a love poem called "since feeling is first," and the speaker ends with "for life's not a paragraph /and death i think is no parenthesis."

I xeroxed the page from the fraying volume of *Collected Poems*, carried the half sheet of paper in my pocket nearly all the time, memorizing it and mouthing cummings's syntax in the exact way the poet asked me not to. Much of my intrigue settled on the discovery that a writer (speaker, lover) was not bound to structures (like paragraphs) but that life (and afterlife) was not bound by such things either. By exploring the possibilities of word choice and word arrangement through form and typography, cummings taught me that confinement does not exist, on the page or beyond. This was my first glimpse into the possibility of what the look of language could do.¹

And what about that named, but unseen, parenthesis? What matters in the poem's final line is the singularity of the last word: parenthesis—not parentheses. Is this the opening side or the closing side? Since it is the negation of one rather than both, and the speaker is finally “thinking” rather than feeling, it all gets beautifully discombobulated. That's how I fell. And such a discombobulating notion of love can only lead to wanting more.

Having borrowed the volume from my school library, I had the means to feel out these parentheses (and the unpaired, one-sided parenthesis) in other poems and did so without regard to the exact meaning of the words. More often than not, cummings places words or phrases, entire stanzas even, within parentheses. They're everywhere, and like the awkward and sometimes unfathomable (certainly incorrect) punctuation, capitalization, and arrangement, they seem to be thrown in without a care. I'm sure that was what attracted my teenage self to them—and to everything else these word puzzles gave. No rules, no deliberation, just delight. And beauty. There is something truly beautiful as the decoration of an idea framed within two half smiles, cupping the words as if holding an utterance which only I (and the unnamed love) can hear.

My journey into cummings's parenthetical world continued wholeheartedly. Unlike other love-poem recipients, what drew me in was not the romantic declarations of love, but the shared love of words, and increasingly, technique.

my darling since
you and
i are thoroughly haunted by
what neither is any
echo of dream nor
any flowering of any

echo(but the echo
of the flower of

Dreaming)somewhere behind us
always trying(or sometimes trying under

us)to is it
 find somehow(but O gracefully)a
 we,entirely whose least

breathing may surprise
 ourselves
 —let's then
 despise what is not courage my

darling(for only Nobody knows
 where truth grows why
 birds fly and
 especially who the moon is.²

There's no conclusive way to categorize the many uses cummings's parentheticals serve, but there is always the dual elements of surprise and certainty—from the reader's perspective. It's as if the essence of meaning could be found by simply deciphering whatever resides within the parentheses. Like the half wink that claims the parenthesis today as an emoticon, cummings's speaker places meaning alongside (and within reach of) mystery. Coupled with daring syntax filled with carefully repeated phrases, the parenthetical asides clarify without revealing exactness. This is difficult ground for a lot of readers. We almost literally teeter between the two ends—mystery on the one side, certainty on the other. And just so we don't get too comfortable with the latter, cummings refuses to close us in: the last stanza opens the parentheses, but they remain unclosed.³

That both words and the symbols accompanying them should be taken with equal weight is something cummings was purposeful about.⁴ Even in the most unreadable examples—those poems which are visual explorations of ideas more than verbal ones—the awkwardness has a place. Even if that purpose is to confound us. They (parentheses and the poet) can be at times playful, somber, sarcastic, cutting, or laugh-out-loud funny. Open or closed, the effect can be varied: an exhaled insight, something like a sigh, maybe a whisper. The curved lips of a frown or of a smile. Hands cupping the ears to hold sound at bay or bending the ear's helix just slightly to better catch the wave of sound and harness

it audible. Hands folded in prayer or holding a cricket caught in the summer grass. Figures embracing; the same ones unable to touch. Silence held off or welcomed. Wishing for more, wanting less.

More than finding work that both baffled and excited me, I found kinship. In the introduction to the volume, cummings writes, “We can never be born enough. . . . You and I wear the dangerous looseness of doom and find it becoming.”⁵ Through cummings I learned that symbols—a whole constellation of which we funnel into the term “punctuation”—have both surprising beauty and alluring power. cummings, and the poets and prose writers who would follow him into my library, taught me how the tiniest scratch, dot, and doodle could dazzle even the half-closed eye. The key, though, was to open those droopy lids and finally see them and all their punctuated subtlety. I put on “the looseness of doom” and got to work.



I did not need to travel far to find another poet who occupied the page in dramatic and exciting ways.

The Soul selects her own Society—
Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—

I’ve known her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—⁶

If anything could be considered Emily Dickinson's trademark, the dash would be it. In addition to transforming traditional meters and stanza forms, Dickinson capitalizes on the visual quirkiness of a pencil's movement. Indeed, early editors modified the poems in favor of more traditional line breaks, syntax, and typography. Whereas cummings composed with the technology of the typewriter, it is Dickinson's hand that originally gave us her detached lines. It's possible to find two or three versions, and thus hard to say exactly what Dickinson's actual dash looked like.⁷ Though I encountered them in typeset, in the context of the poems, her dashes seem dainty and scripted, abrupt and callous, exact yet meandering. Given their frequency in her poems, a reader could read them as stylistic additives, scribbles and place fillers, rather than deliberate, purposeful, and meaningful.

Like cummings's many idiosyncratic techniques, Dickinson's dashes act in many ways. On the page, Dickinson's dash creates an emphatic push and pull, visually and cognitively; the connective tissue of her poem, but also the vehicle by which her perceptive leaps occur. The society is selected; "Then," like a slingshot, it—"shuts the Door—." Like the repetition of "Unmoved," the dashes hold us in place and propel us. In the final stanza, the soul becomes a purposeful—perhaps pouty, perhaps dutiful—actor "[closing] the Valves of her attention—/ Like Stone—." The dash both scatters and underscores that finality.

Because she uses them so often, it's hard to say if Dickinson's purpose was invariable. But what can be deciphered is how her attention to this mark factors into her control of lines and the poem as a whole. They suggest lack of control, because they look like afterthoughts, but in strikingly visual ways, they embody power.

My early journals are filled with handwritten drafts and translating them into typed script was a challenge. Dickinson taught me that there may be a finite number of symbols that the typewriter, an invented mechanism, provides, but my pen never pens the same mark twice. Each time the comma pockmarks my page,

it has a slightly different curve. It's true, as Pico Iyer points out: "Only a lover notices the small things"—these "tiny little scratches" that wind their way into our essays, letters, emails and documents. They become weightier when they're asked to do more than guide us, but speak on their own as they do with emoticons and text-speak. If we choose appropriately, we have powerful results.

Seeking the infinity of choice, sooner or later, I started to examine prose along with poetry. I fell in love with Vonnegut and Brontë, Twain and Faulkner—and Melville:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world.⁹

Melville is a master of cadence as he weaves the opening lines of *Moby Dick*, showing how manipulation of rhythm can happen with phrasing (he's a great piler of clauses) and punctuation working together. The first person narrator is introduced by name. We know him immediately. He essentially narrates a memory: "Some years ago," but instead of an aside or a detachment (of the kind Dickinson gives), what follows, set off by dashes, is a perfect story-telling device. We understand its importance because it comes out of the shadow of the parenthetical, and this is given in part because of the visual offsetting of the phrase. Moreover, we begin to trust Ishmael, or at least become drawn in by him. There is a curious exactness about Melville's choice. The words are not cupped by parentheses so you cannot hear them; rather, by using dashes they are, in effect, stapled to the page.

I found a similar visual meaning in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour." A dash appears four times, once in dialogue, and twice at pivotal turning points of the story. (The story itself is only twenty paragraphs, a few are only a single sentence.) The reader is taken on Mrs. Mallard's internal journey as she retreats to her room, steadies herself on the chair, breaking into the sobs

that a reader initially accepts as those of grief. Chopin does not let those assumptions last for too long: Here is the first dash:

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.¹⁰

Two sentences later, Mrs. Mallard whispers, “free, free, free” sending readers into their own free-fall of emotion and analysis as to the true nature of the Mallards’s marriage. What would compel a woman to make such a statement at such a time? The next paragraph offers a complimentary portrait of the husband, Brently. But a partial explanation for the release of “free, free, free,” comes with the narrative report that the character looks forward to being able (finally) to live for herself. The turn is captured so succinctly with the use of the second dash:

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

This instance is the most telling for showing what the dash is capable of doing—silently. The pause that is inherently captured between “and yet she had loved him” and the culminating sentiment “sometimes” has a piercing effect. It both creates and validates the tension. What kind of marriage did the Mallards have? Is Mrs. Mallard’s slow (in the context of an hour, not so slow) exhalation upon hearing the news of her husband’s apparent death in a train accident due to grief or relief? In a way, the dash symbolizes Mrs. Mallard’s own silence, but also the reader’s gasp of recognition.

Chopin throws all of this into further narrative intricacy with the final scene. Mrs. Mallard departs from her room (on her sister’s urging), and begins to descend the staircase as the front

door opens to reveal that Brently is not dead at all. Mrs. Mallard drops dead (we've been warned that she "was afflicted with heart trouble") at the sight of him. The final line—and the final dash:

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of the joy that kills.

Because each dash has a different function, Chopin showed me that punctuation was about choice. With so many options for just one mark, a whole toolbox opens. I only had to choose.



A few years ago, when I met my brother Erick at his favorite bar in Manhattan, we somehow got to talking about the writing he had to evaluate as a supervisor at the Civilian Complaint Review Board. He professed that he never let his assistants use semicolons, quoting Kurt Vonnegut's famous retort: "Here is a lesson in creative writing. First rule: Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college."¹¹

I wasn't sure how to take Vonnegut's adage, or my brother's swearing off of these hermaphroditic little characters. As a teacher, I spent a good deal of time explaining to students that the semicolon has an important place in one's grammatical catalog. I had assigned chapters and designed exercises demonstrating the effect (and correctness) of semicolons, why they differ from commas and how they can help bridge the meaning between two ideas. In fact, I had become quite fond of the semicolon, a love that I still have today. Whereas Vonnegut was critical of the mixed message (and therefore impudence) its physical formation gave it, I find the either-or proposition the semicolon offers rather intriguing and striking, both in meaning and appearance.

Perhaps my love for the semicolon reflects that I had encountered so many writers who grew up with "rules," writers who were more "traditional" with their punctuation. Again, I blame

Melville. Here are the next two sentences of *Moby Dick*'s opening paragraph:

It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.¹²

With the semicolon, Melville creates a cumulative list. Because the list already includes commas and a dash, the reader is able to follow which parts go together as units and which phrases build the parallelism. This goes beyond correctness; I see the marks as hinges which allow us as readers to swing from idea to idea.

Moby Dick introduced me to the semicolon, but the prose techniques of Richard Wright, especially in his novel *Native Son*, helped me see how compelling ideas demand deliberate punctuation. The main character, Bigger Thomas—a black man living in 1930s Chicago—has just committed an unspeakable act. He has killed a white woman, Mary Dalton, whom he had driven, along with her boyfriend, to a restaurant where the three get drunk, Bigger awkwardly obliged to join in. When Mary is too drunk to make it back to her room, Bigger carries her in and then awkwardly kisses her. When her mother, who is blind, appears at the door, Bigger smothers Mary. He must dispose of the body. Notice how Wright controls the pacing of this scene:

He stood with her body in his arms in a silent room and cold facts battered him like waves sweeping in from the sea: she was dead; she was white; she was a woman; he had killed her; he was black; he might be caught; he did not want to be caught; if he were they would kill him.¹³

Each of the “cold facts” that Bigger must contend with come to us as independent clauses—definitive and complete. By linking them not with commas or even conjunctions, each idea maintains its singularity while still being part of the collective whole. That linking is pivotal to capture Bigger’s mindset and the conflicts that build not only because of the crime, but also because of his status as a black man in the America of that time.

Later in part two, once things escalate (he has decided to write a ransom note to create the conspiracy and the flight from his crime begins), the tension between clauses joined with commas, finished with periods, and linked through semicolons mirrors the character’s mindset:

He went to his room, into the closet, closed the door and listened. Silence. He came out, left the door open and, in order to get to the closet quickly and without sound, pulled off his shoes. He lay again on the bed, his mind whirling with images born of a multitude of impulses. He could run away; he could remain; he could even go down and confess what he had done. The mere thought of these avenues of action were open to him and made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands. But they would never think he had done it; not a meek black boy like him.¹⁴

In third person limited narration, Wright describes things through the character, though not in his voice. Part of the impact here and elsewhere in the novel is Wright’s manipulation of clauses. But notice the pivotal list of Bigger’s choices: *He could run away; he could remain; he could even go down and confess what he had done*. These are complete thoughts that need to be linked and linked with more definitiveness than a comma could provide. But they are not separate thoughts; by choosing the semicolon rather than either the comma or the end stopped period, Wright signals that these three choices are of equal consequence—structurally, but also as plot devices. This is also dependent on the order Wright chooses. Compare this structure to the next line, where commas link the ideas in subtler though equally impactful

ways (using “that” as the transitional link). Finally, the climactic line of the paragraph ends with a subordinate clause: *not a meek black boy like him*. Grammatically, it makes better sense for the choice to be a comma; the clause is clearly dependent on the first part of the sentence. But the semicolon breaks it off as if it was its own thought (if we understand the rules that partially—at least—govern the use of semicolons). Of course the novel’s impact centers on Bigger’s status in society, and the conflict is fueled by internal strife as much as external discord. The line represents both his triumph and his downfall. One idea must hold the hand of the other. Consider again Wright’s line with variations:

But they would never think he had done it, not a meek
black boy like him.

or

But they would never think he had done it—not a meek
black boy like him.

or even

But they would never think he had done it. Not a meek
black boy like him.

Each offers a different reading entirely, even on a visual level. In the first, the comma undermines the significance of the thought. The dash alternative is my favorite spatially, but here it offers too much detachment. The hinge effect of Wright’s semicolon does not exist with the dash. The reader is set too far away from the first part of the sentence. The final example offers a fragment, which could be a good choice, capitalizing “Not” and emphasizing the incompleteness of the idea, which parallels Bigger’s dilemma.

I am, of course, looking at the passage as a published, final draft. While it might be a stretch to imagine Wright scrutinizing the impact of those tentative marks of punctuation, his expertise as a prose writer (and also a poet; Wright penned many haikus, where

scrutiny and exactness is demanded) suggests that he does so with deliberate precision. When I look closer at writers like Richard Wright, I understand that even if it is an instinctual choice, it is one that shows him in total control of all aspects of his writing. If matched perfectly with exact word choice and dynamic syntax, imagine what the right piece of punctuation can mean. I could do worse than aspire to such perfection.



Upon first reading Gertrude Stein, I admit that I really wished someone would have introduced her to the semicolon, and indeed there were times of frustration boiling towards anger at what I thought at the time was complete disregard of “rules.” But the more I read, the more I moved towards an almost complete reversal of my initial annoyance. In her unconventionality, she teaches me much about the coherence of ideas and how punctuation factors into that coherence. She tells us this in *Lectures in America*, published in 1935, where she wrote:

When I first began writing I felt that writing should go on I still do feel that it should go on but when I first began writing I was completely possessed by the necessity that writing should go on and if writing should go on what had commas and semi-colons to do with it what had commas to do with it what had periods to do with it what had small letters and capitals to do with writing going on which was at the time the most profound need I had in connection with writing.¹⁵

Stylistically, Stein’s proficiency is in her ability to demonstrate one of language’s singular qualities that transcends (with one or two exceptions) all spoken and written tongues: its recursive nature. A thought could potentially go on and on infinitely without stopping simply by adding clauses (both independent and dependent) and joining them with conjunctions, if not punctuation, that allow for the general logic of the idea to be maintained. This is not as easy as it seems. In order to sustain the momentum of the “thought” the writer must manipulate syntax in ways that a reader

can follow without giving up. The conjunction is the biggest help in this pursuit, but it's not the only tool.

In her book *Paris France*, Stein goes into a short primer on the cuisine of her adopted country prefaced by the statement (hanging out in lonely isolation as its own paragraph): "Cooking like everything else in France is logic and fashion."

French cooking is traditional, they give up the past with difficulty in fact they never do give it up and when they have had reforms so called in the seventeenth century and in the nineteenth century, they only accepted it when it became really a fashion in Paris, but when they took something from the outside like the Polish baba brought by Stanislas Leczinski, the father-in-law of Louis XV or the Austrian croissant brought by Marie Antoinette, they took it over completely so completely that it became French so completely French that no other nation questions it.¹⁶

In this one sentence, I count six independent clauses kept together logically by dependent or subordinate clauses. Despite the fusing of complete thoughts (a no-no, your English teacher will tell you), the ideas are quite coherent because we have been acquainted with syntactical units, how interrupters work, and how punctuation, in its most fashionable dress, can help. Our minds have relatively little difficulty making sense of Stein's sentence because she guides us as at exactly the right places, even if they're not exactly the correct places. And in doing so, she gives us a few pieces of trivia and metaphorically demonstrates how recursive language works—a constant borrowing from multiple "cuisines."

Tiny commas sprinkle like Gretel's breadcrumbs though a forest of words. To make the metaphor even more poignant, I'd say that this is exactly where Stein's seemingly lackadaisical choice of commas and conjunctions exerts power: the writer's power to force her reader to connect the ideas as we would hear them, not as we do see them on the page. Indeed, given the choices of punctuation she has, it is surely deliberation that guides her. Stein attempts to push us beyond our capacities to seek out a

reasonable connection between ideas. Juxtaposing words for the sake of undermining our sense of reason, she asks us to be comfortable with the discomfort. But here is her trick: she plays simplicity against us with stream of consciousness associations.

I cannot help admiring Stein and her persistence. There is intense beauty in her powerful disregard for convention, the choice to lose the comma when it suits her and put it in just when we need it. Moreover, there are times when the comma is simply the best, most elegant and emphatic choice. Here is another prose experimenter—Jack Kerouac—from his elegiac tribute to the American landscape, *On the Road*:

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, and all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all the rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.¹⁷

In one moody, emphatic sentence, Kerouac finishes his sad masterpiece, capturing all that came before, all that will come after—simultaneously momentary and transitory. On the road, uninhibited by stoplights, the thoughts of narrator Sal Paradise feel stream of consciousness, but are, in fact, artfully controlled by syntax and guided by punctuation—the pauses are slight but serious. The commas allow the prose to build, for the phrases

to accumulate through the conditional certainty of “stars’ll be out” to the indefinite “nobody, nobody knows what’s going to happen . . . besides the forlorn rags of growing old.” The comma functions as the mediator between the certain and the uncertain, and because of its crescent simplicity, its curved gentleness, the choice is exactly right for Kerouac’s climactic prose moment.

Not surprisingly, Stein and Kerouac are both products and instigators of one of the major paradigm shifts in literature: the loosening of “tradition,” loosening of the “rules.” They both seem to embody the freedom that Sal Paradise sought by taking to the road: finding one’s own way to clarity. That is, after all, the writer’s lot—whether in poetry or prose—to find one’s way to clarity. I can embrace or reject all or none of it: choice. The writer decides where to turn in the labyrinth; punctuation can serve as lamps lit along the way. I imagine a tail of school children filing down the passageway, each connected to the other with some unspoken comfort and security. Reconnecting to passages like these reminds me that in my search for clarity, I ought to revel, at least a little, in both the subtlety and strength found in those tiny stitches between the words.

Unspoken connections. It’s easy to forget that each connective punctuation mark is a symbolic representation of a pause and a common means to indicate how long this pause should be. Do I wait a mere breath? An inhale and exhale? Two? Two thousand? Because somewhere in the course of a long time (ago, that is), we decided that different marks would mean different kinds of pauses. End marks—period, exclamation points and question marks—signal longer pauses than mid-line marks—the dash, comma, semicolon, colon, ellipses, parentheses. But how can it be said otherwise: these marks are meant in some way to capture silence; more so, to position silence against “sound”—the mind’s articulation of the words. For a writer to be able to manipulate silence seems to me to be quite an undertaking, and one well worth the deliberation: deciding whether that silence should be captured as a gasp or a sigh, a hiccup or a yawn, to signal another beginning, or a necessary, powerful, and very beautiful end.

¹ e.e. cummings, “[since feeling is first],” *Collected Poems* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 180.

² Ibid, 227.

³ The parentheses which open in line 18 of this poem numbered 227 in *The Collected Poems* end (perhaps) in line 1 of poem (228) that appears on the opposite page. “because i love you)last night.”

⁴ Critic Rodney Philips explains that cummings was “highly distrustful of typesetters and always scrutinized proofs meticulously.” His book *Hand of the Poet* includes a copy of one of cummings’s typed poems; the marginalia (in cummings’s handwriting) requests “plenty of (blank) space” with lines drawn to both the top and bottom of the poem and the words “suggested break” appear in pencil on either side of 11 or 12 dashed lines (page 164-5). In Rodney Philips, Susan Benesch, Kenneth Benson, and Barbara Bergeron. *The Hand of the Poet: Poems and Papers in Manuscript*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1997), 164-5.

⁵ cummings, “Introduction,” *Collected Poems*, n.p.

⁶ Emily Dickinson, “The Soul Selects Her Own Society (1862),” *The Academy of American Poets* (Poets.org).

⁷ The text I cited from the American Academy of Poets matches the ones edited by R.W. Franklin in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. The Emily Dickinson Foundation seems to favor this version.

⁸ Pico Iyer, “In Praise of the Humble Comma,” *Time Magazine*, June 24, 2001 (www.time.com).

⁹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. A Robert Lee (Everyman, 1993), 5.

¹⁰ Kate Chopin, “The Story of an Hour,” *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*, 9th ed, ed. Michael Meyer (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2011), 15-17.

¹¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007), 23.

¹² Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 5.

¹³ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 88.

¹⁴ Ibid, 179.

¹⁵ Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 217.

¹⁶ Gertrude Stein, *Paris France* (New York: Liveright, 1970), 46.

¹⁷ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 309-310.

The Commons: UB Faculty Essays

The School of Arts and Sciences publishes faculty essays on topics that address a general audience in order to encourage the dissemination of ideas, to increase the dialogue between the disciplines, and to support the core curriculum. There is a four-member editorial board that will vote on acceptance and suggest editorial advice where necessary and/or helpful.

Once accepted, these essays will be published in two ways. A small run of 100 saddle-stitched copies designed by SASD Design Service will be printed. These can be used at the discretion of the professor, but should primarily be given to majors and other professors. The essays will also be published in PDF form and made available online.

These essays can and should be used for UB classes. Once enough essays are collected, a bound anthology may be assembled and printed. Again, this could be used for future UB core classes like Capstone or First Year Seminar, or an Honors course designed specifically around the material. These essays are published by the School of Arts and Sciences but submission will be open to all UB faculty.

Guidelines

1. The essay should be between 2000-5000 words, though exceptions can be made for slightly longer ones.
2. Essays should not have had prior appearance in print or in digital form. The author will retain the copyright for future publication.
3. Essays should engage a general readership. They should be influenced by scholarly training and experiences related to our disciplines, but not be scholarly writing. For example, an essay on “Henry Miller and Jean Francois Lyotard: The Aesthetics of ‘The Inhuman’ in *Tropic of Cancer*” would be inappropriate both because it is too narrow a topic, and because it would be too technical for a general audience. However, this is also not a blog entry. Instead, locate it somewhere between a personal essay and a semi-formal essay on a general topic of interest.
4. The citation method will be end notes (a style sheet is available), although it is certainly possible to write an essay without notes at all or with a list of sources for further reading.
5. Faculty should also provide a biographical paragraph and a photo.
6. A proposal or query letter is encouraged, with or without a draft of the essay. Certainly, if there is a completed essay you think is appropriate, send it to the editorial board. But before starting an essay, we encourage you to consult the board in the planning stages.
7. Send all materials to thecommons@bridgeport.edu.



There's a secret about punctuation that most English teachers don't tell you: beyond "rules" and correctness, there's a power and beauty to those little symbols that we find ourselves placing between and around the words on the page or computer screen. Rather than thinking about punctuation marks as necessary and therefore tedious—perhaps even unwelcome—we can learn to love their curves and points and use them with purpose, creativity, and yes, even affection. With the help of some of the best poets and prose writers, Professor Amy Nawrocki shows how various marks (parentheses, dashes, semicolons and commas) can inspire and delight, open us to the possibilities of a deep and enduring love of language and all its decorations.

Amy Nawrocki, a Senior Lecturer at the University of Bridgeport, teaches writing and literature. She is the author of three poetry collections and her fourth, *Four Blue Eggs*, was published in February 2014. Among other awards, she was a finalist for the Homebound Publications Poetry Prize and for the Loft Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared in such venues as *Garbanzo Literary Journal*, *The Wayfarer*, *The Battered Suitcase*, *Yes Poetry Journal*, and *The Newtowner*. She is also the co-author of *A History of Connecticut Wine* and *A History of Connecticut Food*. She has been known to puzzle over the placement of periods and reportedly sees parentheses in her sleep.